

Helping Veterans Enter Agriculture
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Fifty percent of farmers are age 55 or older and heading toward retirement so we will need to replace them. Currently, 10 percent of veterans are unemployed. Some 17.2 percent of them are disabled. The list of disabilities includes mental health issues such as post-traumatic distress disorder. I served in the U.S. Marine Corps in a communications battalion. In 2005 I was deployed to Camp Fallujah, Iraq. Operation Phantom Fury was going on at the time – one of the fiercest battles of the war. We were part of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. That battle really affected me. Two weeks later I was shipped home and discharged. There was not a whole lot of support for transition back to civilian life at that time. The Veterans Administration has learned from those mistakes and more is available now.

My wife and I moved back to Pennsylvania where I grew up. From 2005 to 2008 I went from job to job but could not really figure out what I wanted to do. My military occupational specialty didn't translate well to the civilian workforce. A lot of veterans face the same issues when they return to civilian life. My first job was delivering pizza for Domino's. When you leave the Marines as a sergeant with 15 Marines under your command, as I did, and take up life delivering pizza, it is quite a setback. Two years went by and I started getting it together and started a few companies, partly because I could not hold a traditional job in the civilian sector. The last company I started was a construction company and I was doing well, making money. Then the housing crisis of 2008 hit. I closed the doors of the company and walked away debt-free.

We were living on our savings because in those times, there were no jobs available. To make matters worse, I could not collect unemployment. So for the next year I worked for minimum wage when I could. This was not enough to pay the bills. We had two young daughters at the time. It got so bad that we sold our furniture and other possessions. It was then that my wife discovered a community-supported agriculture operation in Dublin near Delaware Valley College. The owner gave our family a full share of produce in exchange for working on the farm. Within two weeks of working on the farm I was sold. I decided that agriculture was where I wanted to spend my career. It also made me think about what I could do to provide for better transitions for other veterans. I took my family to the A Day event at Delaware Valley College. This is something that I had attended every year since I was a child. That prompted me to begin the enrollment process at the college. I decided to major in green horticulture.

After my freshman year I had a unique opportunity to renovate a farm that was run down in exchange for affordable housing. I was a full-time student so it gave me an opportunity to directly apply what I was learning in class. While doing so, I saw the difference between what I was learning and my peers in class who did not have as much hands-on experience as I was getting. I earned my B.S. degree in three years. At the time my wife Angel and I had a third daughter on the way. I graduated in 2012. Dean Russell Redding offered me the opportunity to develop the Veterans Organic Farming Program at Delaware Valley College. It is a three-

semester certificate program with two semesters at the college and one year working on the land at the Rodale Institute in Emmaus, PA. DeIVal is a Yellow Ribbon School so veterans who are eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill will have up to 100 percent of their tuition paid by their GI Bill, in addition to receiving funds for housing and books. The program also includes business development skills and career placement assistance. What agriculture means to me and a lot of other veterans is that it promotes life and not death. This is a trend that is growing across the country as more veterans are drawn to agriculture. Programs have cropped up in Western states like California and the Midwest but there was no program on the East Coast.